

Feral Cats

King County's passage of Ordinance #15801 adopted new euthanasia target rates of 20% in 2008 and 15% in 2009. In order to reach the euthanasia targets adopted by the County, all potential treatable animals, including feral cats which make up 8% of all animal intakes, will need to be saved. This document describes a managed feral cat program for dealing with feral cats.

Introduction

Feral cats and feral cat colonies

A feral cat is a domestic cat which has been born in the wild or has reverted to the wild and is not tame. A feral cat colony is a population of feral domestic cats. Members of a feral cat colony can include cats that have strayed after living with human caretakers as well as their offspring, which have had little human contact or none at all.

Feral colonies occur when unsterilised domesticated cats become, intentionally or otherwise, disconnected from their respective human owners and managed domestic environment. They quickly have to learn to fend for themselves and form breeding communities. The greater the food source, the larger a feral colony will become. Feral cat population expansion can be quite rapid.

When a feral colony grows to a large size, those living or working nearby might consider the presence of a locally concentrated cat population to be a nuisance. Complaints made include:

- Urine spraying to mark territory
- Digging in gardens and feces left by the cats
- Noise made by fighting and mating cats
- Predation upon wildlife
- Diseases transmissible to humans (zoonoses)
- Diseases transmissible to pets
- The poor state of health of the cats in the clowder
- The likelihood of population growth

Trap, Neuter and Release Programs

Trap, Neuter and Release programs have been put into place in various areas to address the feral cat population. Feral cats are trapped, altered to prevent further breeding, and then returned to their capture site and/or colony. Programs may include rabies vaccination, some form of identification marking whether ear tipping or microchipping, and the rescue of kittens and other tame cats to adoptive homes.

Comprehensive TNR programs include an educational component designed to reduce domestic cat abandonment including information on responsible pet ownership, the importance of early spaying and neutering, keeping cats indoors, preventing or solving behavior problems. Partnerships between regional animal care and control agencies, humane societies, and the veterinarian community are important to ensure consistent programs, messaging, and cooperative efforts.

Groups promoting this approach believe that it addresses many of the concerns of those who might otherwise consider the colony a nuisance, and provides a palatable alternative for cat lovers who might otherwise take no action to prevent the population from growing.

The TNR method is criticized by some groups, who say that there is no evidence that it succeeds in preventing the growth of cat populations, and in fact artificially maintains the numbers of feral cats in many areas. The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) has adopted a policy that supports managed feral cat colonies, and has stated that, "All free-roaming abandoned and feral cats that are not in managed colonies should be removed from their environment and treated in the same manner as other abandoned and stray animals in accord with local and state ordinances" (AVMA Policy statement, Free-roaming Abandoned and Feral Cats - http://www.avma.org/issues/policy/animal_welfare/feral_cats.asp).

Managed Cat Colonies

A colony in which the TNR method is being used to sterilize the cats and that is under the regular care and observation of a caretaker is referred to as a *managed* TNR program. The goal of colony management should be the eventual reduction of the colony through attrition, although resultant attrition is disputed by critics of TNR programs who state that managed colonies are an interim solution to the problem of free-roaming abandoned and feral cats. A model feral cat colony program should include the following elements:

1. The goal should be to continually reduce the cat population; however, eliminating the colony may not be achievable due to the immigration of new cats, including the relocation of feral cats from other colonies.
2. The colony should be located in an area where the cats do not pose a threat to protected wildlife or where they may pose a nuisance or zoonotic disease risk to the public. The location of the colony should be inconspicuous so as not to encourage abandonment of pet cats. The area should be kept clean, and food left for the cats should be consumed by dark so as not to attract pests and wildlife.
3. The colony must comply with local ordinances, and landowner permission must be obtained. Jurisdictions considering managed cat colonies should develop standards through ordinance to insure the development of a

program that provides an organized community program with proper oversight and accountability.

4. There should be a designated caretaker and a group of volunteers with monitoring program in place to identify new cats joining the colony, as well as cats requiring medical attention. Identification and medical history records should be kept for all cats.
5. Ideally, all cats within the colony should be humanely captured in order to receive the following treatments:
 - Health examination
 - Sterilization
 - Rabies vaccination
 - Vaccination against feline panleukopenia, feline herpesvirus -1 , and calicivirus.
 - Identification by ear-tipping
 - Testing for feline leukemia virus and feline immunodeficiency virus.
6. Adoption of socialized kittens of feral adult cats if homes are available.
7. Return or removal from the colony of cats that cannot be adopted.
8. In order to meet the primary objective of reducing cat populations over the long term, programs should be organized to perform the largest number of sterilizations possible.
9. Services can be prioritized when resources are limited. The largest feral cat programs offer only sterilization, ear-tipping, and rabies vaccinations on the premise that effective cat control will also reduce the transmission of infectious diseases.

Existing King County Program

Traditionally in King County, feral cats were picked up by animal control officers or trapped by citizens and brought to the shelter, and after their required stray-hold period was up, humanly euthanised. These cats were typically brought into custody after trespassing and/or nuisance complaints were filed by residents in King County.

Since 2006, King County Animal Care and Control Services has worked with several organizations to begin to address the feral cat issue. A partnership was developed with South County Cats to find homes for feral cats. Through the partnership, South County Cats finds potential cat adopters that are looking for feral cats that will help with rodent problems. These “barn cats” are identified by KCACC and provided to South County Cats for adoption, reducing the number of feral cats that are euthanized.

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A partnership has also been developed with the Feral Cat Spay Neuter Project to identify feral cats that have already been altered and are part of a colony. When a cat with a tipped ear comes into a KCACC shelter, the Feral Cat Spay Neuter Project is notified so they can try to unite the animal with a colony. The Feral Cat Spay Neuter Project has also been rescuing hard to place cats from the shelters and adopting them out at off-site locations. Although these programs are modest, they have resulted in the continued decrease of the numbers of animals euthanized in our shelters and show promise.

Proposed Program

Implement a managed feral cat program that incorporates elements of the advisory committee's recommendations.

	Option	Needs Requirement	Risk
1.	Animal Care and Control Advisory Committee Recommendations		
	Implement advisory committee recommendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Develop a policy citing TNR as the preferred, humane method for reducing the feral cat population ▪ Acquire/distribute training and educational materials re: TNR ▪ Develop/maintain community partnerships for feral cat spay/neuters ▪ Increase existing vet staff to spay/neuter feral cats in shelter custody ▪ Amend Title 11 where necessary to support TNR program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Euthanasia targets will not be met unless feral cat community supporters rescue all feral cats from King County
2.	Pilot Managed TNR Program		
	Initiate a pilot managed TNR program that includes ACC Advisory Committee recommendations and adds a cat colony registration process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ordinance changes ▪ Colony registration and dispute resolution procedures developed ▪ Establish tracking methods to properly identify cats from feral colonies ▪ Analyze and report pilot results 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cat colony caretakers will not self-identify and participate in program. ▪ Nuisance cats won't be identified and tracked. ▪ If we build it, will they come?

Discussion

Animal Care and Control Advisory Committee Recommendations

The Animal Care and Control Citizens Advisory Committee recommended that the County develop a policy citing TNR as the preferred, humane method for reducing the feral cat population. The program would:

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- Provide free spay/neuter surgery for feral/free-roaming cats that are being managed as part of a TNR program.
- Caretakers would trap the cats and take them to the KCACC spay/neuter clinic for surgery, rabies vaccination and an ear-tip to clearly identify the cat as being altered. A surgical release form would be signed by the caretakers stating that they care for the cats or have direct knowledge that the cats are being cared for. After surgery, cats would be released back to their caretakers for post-surgery care and returned to their colony.
- Provide designated feral cat surgery days
- Consult with local organizations that are currently providing spay/neuter surgery for feral cats to review protocols for TNR and to coordinate spay/neuter days and the efficient allocation of resources.
- Assess the possibilities of partnering with other local non-profit organizations and local veterinarians to provide these surgeries.

Other steps include:

- Obtain training materials and scripts for Call center employees and ACO officers that will allow them to better resolve feral/free-roaming cats questions and concerns
- Develop and provide reference material that can be given to individuals who would learn more about TNR and the resources available within the community
- Work with feral cat advocates in King county to provide assistance with TNR issues
- Expand the volunteer program to provide a feral cat assistance team which can also address concerns about cats coexisting with wildlife
- Consult with UC David Shelter medicine for assistance with housing feral cats while they are at the shelter
- Amend Title 11 to accommodate TNR policies and processes

Resources

Implementation of a TNR program would require spay/neuter of impounded, feral cats. Assuming that approximately 1,000 surgeries would be performed annually, additional vet staff and medical supplies would be required.

Managed TNR Pilot Program

The managed TNR pilot program proposal would implement the Animal Care and Control Citizens' Advisory Committee recommendations and add a cat colony registration process and a management and tracking element. The purpose of the registration and tracking process is to develop cooperative working relationships with

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individuals who are actively involved in managing an identified feral cat colony and addressing complaints, and maintain the ability to gather statistics and data to measure results.

Registered cat colony caretakers would bring in trapped feral cats for spay/neuter surgery, vaccination and microchipping. Incoming feral cats identified as a colony resident would be returned to their respective colony. Feral cat colony members who are subject to repeat nuisance complaints would be subject to enforcement action including removal from the colony, possible relocation or potential euthanasia (subject to a dispute resolution process).

Feral cats brought in from non-colony caretakers would be rescued to other community TNR partners.

The animal control code would need to be amended to facilitate the TNR program and cat colony registration. Such might include license fee exemptions, redefinition of harboring and keeping animals to deal with zoning restrictions, and requirements that colonies not be located in protected wildlife areas, don't encourage abandonment of pet cats, and provide for mechanism to sufficiently address potential nuisance complaints.

This effort would be a two-year pilot which will provide enough statistical results to determine if this option is a viable alternative to address the feral cat issue.

Resources

This initiative is not contemplated as part of the 2008 Executive Proposed Budget. Implementation of a TNR program would require spay/neuter of impounded, feral cats. Assuming that approximately 1,000 surgeries would be performed annually, additional vet staff and medical supplies would be required if spay/neuter surgeries performed in-house. Alternatively, spay/neuter surgeries could be performed through public/private partnerships in the community. Also, agency could seek public/private partnership to support and manage program (as established in code) as occurs in other model jurisdictions.